Gullah/Geechee Language

A unique creole language is spoken along the Sea Islands and adjacent mainland of South Carolina and Georgia. The linguistically distinct Gullah language is found in both South Carolina and Georgia, but the language and its speakers are typically referred to as "Geechee" in Georgia. As a creole language, Gullah began as a pidgin, a simplified speech used for communication among people of different languages. The pidgin likely began in the castles and barracoons along the west coast of Africa where captives were held before being loaded onto the slave ships. The language, with its vocabulary and grammatical roots in European and African languages, developed for practical purposes as a way for Africans and their captors from different linguistic origins to communicate with one another.

Creolization is a linguistic process that emerges from pidgin speech codes. If a pidgin becomes the only form of communication for a succeeding generation of speakers, the processes of linguistic evolution takes over to produce a complete language. Thus creole languages have their own phonological, syntactical, and grammatical rules even though the vocabulary is derived from the ancestral languages which gave rise to the pidgin. (cf. Hall 1965)

This ability to communicate was instrumental in the blending of diverse cultural experiences and retention of African roots. As the Atlantic slave trade continued to flourish, vocabulary from English, French, Portuguese, and other European languages were added to the mix to facilitate communication with European slave owners. The Gullah/Geechee language is the only distinctly African-American creole language in the United States. It has indirectly influenced the vocabulary of the American South and has contributed to traditional Southern speech patterns.

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Although many Gullah/Geechee words are derived from English, Gullah is decidedly not a dialect of English. Gullah is recognized by linguists as a separate language distinguished from English by mutual unintelligibility, i.e., native speakers of only Gullah or only English would not be able to understand one another. Even during the Ebonics controversy of the 1990s, the integrity of Gullah as a language was not seriously questioned by linguistic scholars.

In addition to its syntactic distinctiveness, Gullah has retained certain lexical items and morphological features derived from various African languages. Gullah existed as a largely ignored linguistic phenomenon until the research of Lorenzo Dow Turner (1949) in the 1940s. Turner, the first professionally trained African American linguist, demonstrated that Gullah/Geechee languages contained linguistic features drawn directly from the languages of West Africa. It was these Africanisms, first noted by Turner, that were for many years the focus of Gullah linguistic studies. More recently, however, linguists have produced highly technical studies of such aspects of Gullah language as stress patterns, tense-mood-aspect, and variations in auxiliary verb use (Hopkins 1994). Although challenging for the layman to understand, such technical studies of the Gullah language contribute to general scientific understanding of the nature of human language and linguistic change.

> If you get the full Gullah, it's a song language. That's the deep Gullah. It is a song language and not a deaf language like English. The speaker of a song language doesn't mean exactly just the words alone, but when he has once spoken them, he really couldn't have said it any better. If you catch the song, you can tell exactly what he means. -Sam Gadsden, born 1882 (Lindsay 2000)

Despite its legitimacy as a language, use of Gullah or Geechee was for many years considered to be a mark of low status and ignorance and thus, was a source of pejorative remarks. Many people, including educators, viewed it as substandard or broken English, and encouraged children to give up their native language in favor of so-called "standard English." There was, of course, no option for learning English as a second language, since Gullah was not widely viewed as a legitimate language at that time. Since Emancipation, distinctive Gullah language and folk culture have been subjected to strong acculturative forces and concomitant pressure to assimilate rather than remain ethnically distinct. Assimilation came more rapidly for people in mainland communities that did not have the protection of isolation.

Contempt for the language and derision toward those who use it were recently discussed with one of its most famous speakers, United States Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. Thomas who was born in Pin Point, Georgia, a small community near Savannah, remembers his Geechee beginnings. In December 2000, Justice Thomas participated in a televised question and answer session with high school students. When asked why he did not pose questions in oral arguments before the Supreme Court. Thomas replied ("In His Own Words" 2000),

> …But I'm going to give you a more personal reason, and I think this is probably the first time I ever even told anybody about it. …When I was 16, I was sitting as the only black kid in my class, and I had grown up speaking a kind of a dialect. It's called Geechee. Some people call it Gullah now, and people praise it now. But they used to make fun of us back then. It's not standard English. When I transferred to an all-white school at your age, I was self-conscious … I was trying to speak standard English. I was thinking in standard English but speaking another language. … I just started developing the habit of listening. …I didn't ask questions in college or law school. And I found that I could learn better just listening. …

Over the past several years, Justice Thomas has become more interested in learning about his ancestry and cultural heritage and in sharing the experiences of his youth. He has recently expressed an interest in researching and writing a book about his Gullah/Geechee heritage. "This is a passion of mine, starting to work on a book. For years I've been interested in figuring out all of this." (Davis 2001).

The Gullah language passed through the generations as an oral tradition and has no widely accepted written form. The absence of written language makes preservation even more difficult. As with any living language, Gullah/Geechee continued to evolve through the centuries, but since the mid 1950s the language has changed substantially. The language has incorporated more and more "standard" English loan-words. Accents, cadences, and speech patterns are becoming more anglicized. Loss of the language is of grave concern to many people who attended the Special Resource Study public meetings.

The elders are dying, and young people in many communities often seem to have no interest in learning to speak "that funny way that old folks talk," as was stated by a meeting participant. For that reason, many of those in attendance at SRS public meetings felt strongly that educational programs were necessary so that their young people could learn to have pride and respect for their ancestry, heritage, culture, and language. Some organizations are providing cultural education for the children in their communities, including instruction in the language. Extinction of the language would mean not only a loss to linguistic science but also the disappearance of a mode of practical

communication and artistic expression that is at the core of Gullah/Geechee cultural identity.

The Gullah language is at a critical point for its survival. Gullah is now most frequently spoken in the home or by the elders of the community, although young people are beginning to take more interest in their cultural heritage. By the late 20th Century, as the number of native speakers of Gullah dwindled, pride and concern for the preservation of the language began to surge in some communities. Formal artistic use of Gullah language is increasing among writers, storytellers, performance artists, and even tour guides. Some common Gullah words and phrases, which were heard frequently during this study, are illustrated in the table below (Frazier 1995; Geraty 1998).

Gullah	English
ooman	**woman**
oonuh	**you**
tittuh	**sister**
enty?	**Is that so?**
buckruh	**white man**
e	**he, she, it, his, her**
day clean	**dawn**
coota	**turtle**
krak teet	**talk**
nyam	**eat**
gwine	**going**
wegitubble	**vegetable**

Gullah/Geechee Traditions, Crafts, and Arts

The distinctiveness of Gullah/Geechee culture is clearly defined through a variety of artistic and craft traditions. Many writers and scholars have studied and/or described and analyzed metalworking, quilting, basketry, net making, woodcarving, music, and folklore.

Philip Simmons, born in 1912 on Daniel Island, has spent most of his life in Charleston. He is known worldwide for his ironwork.

Some of the earliest scholarly research on Gullah folklore was by Elsie Clews Parsons (1923). Parsons was later *recognized* as one of the giants of early American anthropology. Following in Parsons' tradition have been dozens of folklorists, musicologists, ethnologists, literary scholars, and others who have attempted to describe, analyze and place into functional context the arts and crafts of Gullah/Geechee people.

Gullah/Geechee people have a rich tradition of oral literature and history including legends, folktales, stories, and accounts of supernatural events. Some elements of Gullah/Geechee culture have been popularized through the creative arts in such works as George Gershwin's folk opera *Porgy and Bess* (1934). Gershwin's opera, the best known of all American operas, was based on *Porgy*, a novel by DuBose and Dorothy Heyward (1925), which was set in Charleston, South Carolina, but several of its key characters and themes are clearly Gullah in culture. Julia Peterkin received the Pullitzer prize for her novel *Scarlet Sister Mary* (1928), in which she candidly portrayed Gullah women and the richness of rural black culture in a manner than was unusual for her time. Peterkin's stories were also dramatized but did not achieve the success of *Porgy and Bess*.

Generations of Americans have delighted in the *Uncle Remus* tales, who have left an indelible, though not necessarily accurate, imprint on American mass culture. The *Uncle Remus* tales, despite being recorded by a white journalist, are now generally held by African-American scholars as good representations of the animal folktales told by enslaved Africans on Turnwold Plantation near Eatonton, Georgia. Since the slave culture was primarily one of oral tradition, Joel Chandler Harris' 19th Century documentation of the folklore and stories may have, in fact, helped to preserve them. Although the *Uncle Remus* tales were collected on an inland plantation, they derive from the traditions of enslaved Africans of the Gullah/Geechee coast. Further impressing the tales of Br'er Rabbit and company on American popular culture was Walt Disney's *Song of the South*, a motion picture adaptation of the *Uncle Remus* stories. Although controversial for its benign view of slavery and portrayal of contented slaves, the Disney movie left a lasting mark on American culture (Brausch 2000; Flusche 1975).

The *Uncle Remus* stories were animal trickster tales in which animals took on human emotions and behaviors – a blend of ancestral African elements with American experience – clear examples of cultural exchange. While ethnologists may debate the possible African, European, or American Indian specific sources for these tales, they are a coherent body of oral literature, which is a distinctly Gullah/Geechee creation. The tales usually portrayed weak characters outwitting the strong and fostered the idea of freedom

Ron Daise, author and performer

within the confines of slavery. Br'er Rabbit is a classic animal trickster. Gullah/Geechee children learned many lessons from these stories, not the least of which were derived from allegories of the manipulation of power by the weak as well as the strong.

Perhaps more directly authentic to the study area but less well-known are the tales in the volume *Bo Rabbit Smart for True: Folktales from the Gullah* (Jaquith, *et. al*., 1981). Jaquith adapted her stories from the 1949 recordings of Albert Stoddard, who was born on Daufuskie Island, SC, in 1872. When he returned to Daufuskie after completing college, Stoddard began the task of writing the stories in Gullah. When he was 77 years old, Stoddard recorded the stories – just as he had heard them in his youth – for the Archive of Folksong of the Library of Congress (Stoddard, 1949).

Today, Gullah/Geechee performers, artists, and community activists are telling their own story. Ron and Natalie Daise, who wrote and starred in the nationally televised children's program Gullah-Gullah Island, are among the best known of these performers. Ron Daise, a native of St. Helena Island, has also written several books and produced recordings on Gullah themes. Jonathan Green, a native of Gardens Corner in Beaufort County, South Carolina, is world renowned for his paintings. Green, who draws inspiration from his Gullah/Geechee culture and the people of his experience, proclaims his Gullah heritage through his artwork. Green's paintings, reflecting Gullah lifestyles through colorful dress, foods, and scenery, are in the permanent collections of several major galleries (Buckman 2003).

John W. Jones of Columbia, South Carolina, bases his paintings on the vignettes or images of enslaved Africans that appeared on Confederate currency. Jones' work was featured in "Confederate Currency: The Color of Money," an exhibition at the Avery Research Center at the College of Charleston. In reviewing the exhibit, Steve Lopez of Time Magazine said, "… John W. Jones took the romanticized slave-labor scenes from Confederate money and reproduced them in oil paintings paired with the bills themselves. The effect is to punctuate the exploitation of blacks for profit."

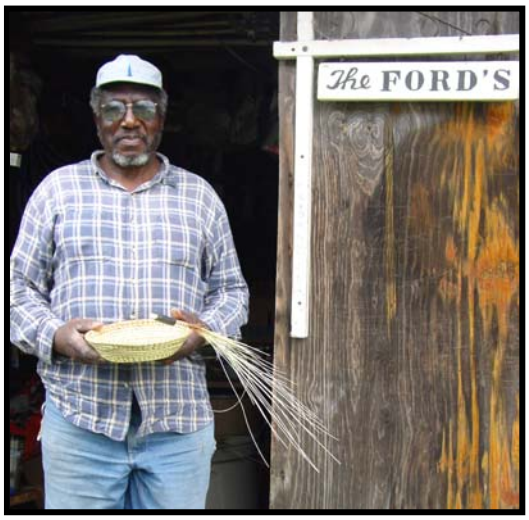
Two of the most important outward signs of Gullah/Geechee ethnicity – coiled basketry and musical shouts – have lately achieved great prominence. The design and construction techniques relating to the art of coiled basketry have clear roots in African culture. Early baskets were made for various practical agricultural and domestic uses in the plantation economy and were generally made by men or elders who were unable to work in the fields. Basketry and other crafts became part of the bartering system and became another source of income for enslaved Gullah/Geechee people. Such artisan skills became even more important for economic survival in the lean years immediately following the Civil War.

Dale Rosengarten (1986) tells the story of Gullah/Geechee basketry from its African roots to its earliest beginnings in late 17th Century Carolina.

> Among the most readily identifiable products of this cultural tenacity are coiled sea grass baskets produced along the Southeastern coast. They belong to a basket sewing tradition – centered today in the small community of Mt. Pleasant just north of Charleston – that has survived in America for over 300 years.

Rosengarten describes the evolution of this African craft from agricultural necessity to art form. Although her work is generally highly regarded, a few modern basket makers take exception to Rosengarten's use of the term "sea grass" to describe what they call "sweetgrass baskets." To such comments, Rosengarten offers this explanation,

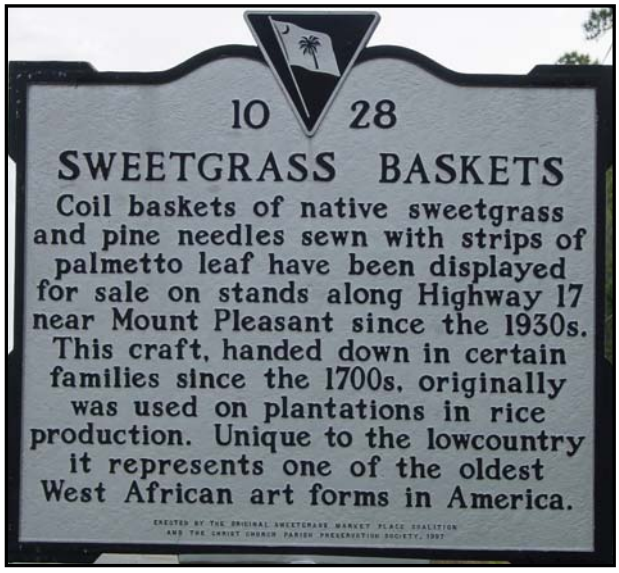
> I'd like to clarify why McKissick Museum used the term "sea grass" in the subtitle of the exhibition and catalogue called *Row Upon Row*. We wanted a term that would refer to both bulrush "work" baskets, common during the era of rice plantations, and sweetgrass "show" baskets, a Mt. Pleasant specialty since the early 20th century. Bulrush has again come back into wide use by the basket makers, so we felt calling the tradition "sweetgrass" was not inclusive enough. We decided on "seagrass" because it was used historically and doesn't refer to any particular plant. (Rosengarten, email communication, 2003)



Elijah Ford is one of several retired men in the Phillips Community who sew baskets.

This seemingly minor difference in vocabulary is a good example of how local perceptions of Gullah/Geechee practices can be at odds with scholarly descriptions using the more general and abstract terminology characteristic of academic discourse.

Although basket making was common on many of the Sea Islands, the art form has persisted and proliferated around Mt. Pleasant, SC, due to the creativity and innovation of local artisans. Early in the 20th Century, basket sewers around Mt. Pleasant began making "show baskets" to sell to tourists and local retailers. These baskets differed from the traditional "work baskets" in style, artistic design, and use of palm leaf rather than palm butt for sewing the rows together. Basketmakers were quick to adapt their styles to the market and constantly invented new styles and shapes (Hofbauer 1997a).



Around 1916, Clarence Legerton, a white entrepreneur from Charleston, recognized the artistic and commercial value of sweetgrass "show" baskets and formed the Sea Grass Basket Company at 263 King Street, as a mail order source. Legerton, who later changed the name of his business to Seagrassco, purchased thousands of dollars worth of baskets from Mt. Pleasant area women and paid about 50 cents for each basket.

In 1930 Mrs. Betsy Johnson and her daughter Edna Rouse are said to have opened the first "basket house" on Highway 17 in front of the Johnson home. Johnson soon purchased baskets

Vera Manigault, a Mt. Pleasant area basketmaker, demonstrates the art of sewing sweetgrass baskets

from others in the community to increase the inventory. Other basketmakers soon followed suit and began displaying their wares in simple stands along US Highway 17 north of Mt. Pleasant, where they could sell to passing tourists. The paving of Highway 17 and the opening of the Grace Memorial Bridge over the Cooper River led to increased traffic and enticed more basketmakers to sell by the roadside. This practice continues today, and as a result the stretch of Highway 17 between Mt. Pleasant and McClellanville has come to be called the "Gullah Highway" (Rosengarten 1986). A historical marker commemorating the long Gullah tradition of sewing sweetgrass baskets was erected in 1972 by the Christ Church Parish Historical Society and the Original Sweetgrass Marketplace Coalition. The marker is located at the site of the first roadside basket stand on Highway 17 (Hofbauer 1997b; Quick 1997).

It was not long before basket sales spread to the City Market in downtown Charleston. In the mid 1970s, around the time of the United States Bicentennial, sweetgrass baskets became recognized nationally and internationally as a Gullah/Geechee cultural icon. The Smithsonian Institution was crucial in this recognition of the artistic and intrinsic value of the baskets, and within a few years, sweetgrass baskets were featured in museums and galleries around the world. (Gullah baskets, collected before the 1940s, show up in such distant and out-of-the-way places as the Booth Memorial Park Museum in Stratford, Connecticut.)

During the late 20th and early 21st Centuries, basket making has become a focal point for dynamic change and evolution in Gullah/Geechee culture, as basket makers develop new styles and forms to meet a growing demand for their work. Vera Manigault of Mt. Pleasant is now sewing "colorful baskets," which feature natural dyes of several colors. According to Manigault, she received the idea and the process in a vision and has since obtained a trademark on the name and the methods. (Manigualt, personal communication 2000) Manigault has traveled throughout the United States to tell about the rich history of sweetgrass basketry and to demonstrate her craft.

Like most basketmakers in the area, Manigault continues to develop her artistic talents in new and different basket forms and styles. Earrings, napkin rings, hair ornaments, and even electrified lamps are frequently available at roadside stands. These items are in themselves testament to the ever-changing dynamic nature of Gullah/Geechee culture, while remaining connected to the past. In addition to traditional roadside stands, sweetgrass baskets are now available for sale at craft fairs, in gift shops, and on the Internet.

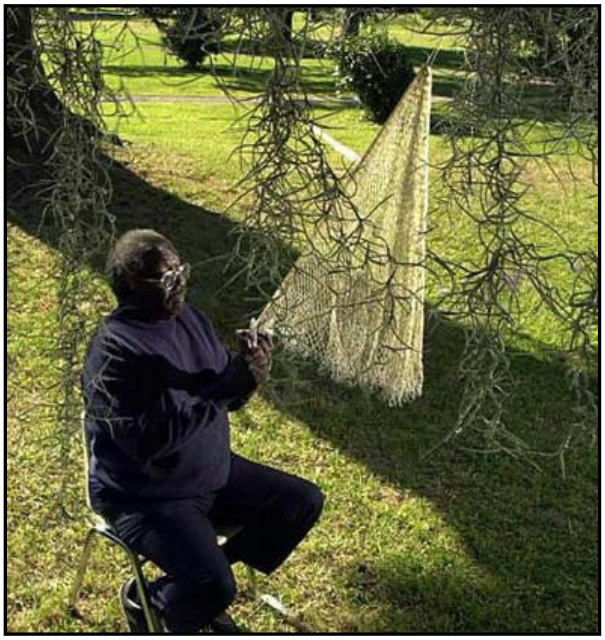
Basketry also serves as a symbolic flash point for conflicts with economic developers over such issues as access to raw materials and commodification of the baskets and their makers. As rural areas are developed, collecting sweetgrass, longleaf pine needles, and

palm has become more and more difficult and may soon put this cottage industry at risk. As a result, some publicly minded businesses and communities are planting sweet grass as an ornamental so that basketmakers will continue to have access. Frequently South Carolina basketmakers are forced to purchase their materials from sources in Florida; some are returning to the use of bulrush to replace all or part of the sweetgrass (Wexler 1993). The principal researcher in this study learned firsthand that collecting basket materials frequently involves snakes, bees, chiggers, mosquitoes, and other hazards.

In 1988, Dale Rosengarten, then affiliated with the McKissick Museum at the University of South Carolina, and Henrietta Snipes, a Mt. Pleasant basketmaker, founded the Sweetgrass Cultural Preservation Society in order to "help our young people to develop their skills and to preserve our heritage in the art of basket making." Now a non-profit corporation, the group has changed its name to the Original Sweetgrass Marketplace Coalition, but continues with the same mission. Jeannette Lee, a Mt. Pleasant basketmaker who now serves as coordinator of the group, says members make presentations, educate tourists about baskets and their history, and teach sweetgrass basket making in the schools. Lee received the Jean Laney Harrison Folk Heritage Award in 2000 in recognition of her continuation of traditional arts that have been passed down through generations of South Carolinians.

Both sweetgrass baskets and their makers are now recognized as major tourist attractions, and baskets have become high-end collectibles. In popular representations of the South Carolina Low Country, coiled sweetgrass baskets have become almost synonymous with Gullah/Geechee culture.

Practitioners of the traditional Gullah/Geechee art of making cast nets are becoming harder and harder to find. Charles C. Williams, better known as "Ce Ce" of McClellanville, South Carolina, is one of the few remaining net makers in the area. He learned the art from his father, and he is afraid that he will be the last net maker in his family. According to Williams, knitting handmade nets requires a great deal of time and patience – more time patience than many of today's young people are willing to invest. Nylon nets are much cheaper, but says Williams, "This here cotton lasts forever, if you take care of it." He is now making small nets for display purposes. Williams, like the basketmakers, is adapting his art to the market. There are other net makers still working on St. Helena Island, Sapelo Island, Wadmalaw Island, and a few other communities within the study area. However, most of the netmakers are getting older and fear that the net making craft will die with them.



Ce Ce Williams of McClellanville, SC, demonstrates his cast net making skills at Charles Pinckney National Historic Site, Mt. Pleasant, SC.

Enslaved Africans who were brought to the Low Country brought with them a rich heritage of textile art, including some experience with quilting. Since enslaved women were often called upon to assist white women with their quilt making, they combined their African textile

Andrew Rodrigues tells the story of an enslaved African woman who was forcibly taken from her homeland to a new and different life in the Low Country. The story is depicted on a "story quilt," made by his wife Vermelle "Bunny" Rodrigues of Pawley's Island, South Carolina.

traditions with European quilting traditions, thus creating a unique creolized art form. Even though enslaved women learned European quilting patterns and techniques, they did not lose touch with their African traditions. Many of their patterns, particularly the strip quilt, showed a clear continuity with West African textile tradition (David 1989; Joyner 1985; Tobin and Dobard 1999).

Quilting began on the plantations to supplement the blankets that were distributed by masters about every three years. Slave women frequently got together at night, after completing their day's work in the fields, to make warm and colorful quilts. Thus, quilting was both a time of work and a time of social interaction. The most common designs were patchwork, mosaic designs constructed from many types of cloth, although they also made pieced and appliquéd quilts. Quilts were usually in the bright colors of African tradition rather than the softer colors preferred by Europeans. Enslaved women also made mattresses, which they stuffed with Spanish moss or stained cotton, and pillows stuffed with chicken or goose feathers (David 1989; Joyner 1985; Tournier 1984).

During the 19th Century, quilt designs became more geometric and included symbols that served as hidden messages for slaves who were escaping via the Underground Railroad. The coded quilts followed the African tradition of secrecy in art in which history, religious beliefs, and cultural stories were transformed into to designs "for all to see but few to read" (Tobin and Dobard 1999: 30-31).

Today in the Low Country, Gullah/Geechee women continue to follow the quilting traditions of their ancestors. Strip, patchwork, and appliquéd quilts are frequently seen in craft shops, festivals, and craft shows. "Story quilts," such as the one pictured here, are popular collectors' items and are also used in educational presentations all over the nation.

Home cooked Low Country foods are favorites at the annual Cultural Day Festival on Sapelo Island, GA.

Gullah/Geechee arts and crafts – including traditional cuisine – show promise for becoming highly marketable and profitable commodities and important symbols of the continued viability of Gullah/Geechee culture. Arts and crafts are second only to language as a rallying point for Gullah/Geechee cultural awareness and ethnic consolidation.

Beginning during the slavery period and continuing into the present, blacks and whites in the Low Country area have eaten the same vegetables, fruits, game, and seafood from the local area. Some items were imported from Europe and some, such as okra, rice, yams, peas, hot peppers, peanuts, sesame seeds (locally known as benne seeds), sorghum, and watermelon came from Africa via the slave trade. American Indian foods such as corn, squash, tomatoes, and berries added to the blend. Rice became the staple of choice for Europeans, who at first looked upon it as fodder for livestock, food for slaves, or a commodity for export.

Enslaved Africans mixed bacon, peas, seafood, vegetables, chicken, or ham with rice to make pilau (commonly called *perlow*), and many of these dishes are still served today in Low Country homes. Hoppin' John, okra rice, and red rice are among the best known examples (Grime 1976; Hess 1992). Black cooks also created stew-like mixtures of seafood and/or meats with vegetables and served them over the ever-present rice. Okra soup is still a Low Country staple. At meal time in Low Country homes of both races, the rice is put on the stove first; then comes the decision of what to cook to go with it. The family rice pot, which must be a heavy pot with a tight-fitting lid and of appropriate size for the family, is used at every meal. The rice pot itself becomes so much a part of family tradition that it is actually handed down in the family as a treasured heirloom.

Gantt and Gerald (2003) cite the following slave recipe for cooking rice:

> Fust t'ing yo' roll up yo' sleeves 'es high as yo' kin, en yo' tak soap en yo' wash yo' hand clean. Den yo' wash yo' pot clean. Fill um wid col' wata en put on de fia. Now w'ile you' wata de bile, yo' put yo' rice een a piggin en yo' wash um well. Den when yo' dun put salt een yo' pot, en bile high. Yo' put yo rice een en le'um bile till 'e swell, den yo' pour off de wata en put yo' pot back o de stove, fo' steam.
>
> --Goliah, a former slave of F. W. Allston, Brookgreen Plantation, ca.1937

**Average weekly food ration given in the 1800s,
Brookgreen Plantation, Murrell's Inlet, SC**

10 quarts rice or peas
1 bushel sweet potatoes
1 pint molasses
2 pounds pork
1 peck meal
1 peck grits
bacon and beef (summer)

(Gantt and Gerald 2003)

Enslaved African cooks had creative genius when it came to making "sumpin" from "nuttin" in their own kitchens – they were experts at stretching their rations, adding fish and game to the mix, or making communal stews shared with neighbors on the slave

Smoked mullet is a crowd favorite at Cultural Day on Sapelo Island, Georgia.

street in the tradition of their African ancestors. They also added vegetables grown in their own gardens and leftovers from their masters' hog killings. Many of these "variety meats" such as pigs' feet, ears, jowls, heads, and entrails are still favored in many Gullah/Geechee households today.

As described above, enslaved cooks applied African cooking methods and seasoning to the ingredients available to them in plantation kitchens and their own homes. English, French, and Spanish traditions common to the area also contributed to the mix. In the process of cooking with foods available in their environment, these creative black women unintentionally invented what is now known as southern cooking. According to Joyner (1999), "The combination created a distinctive southern cuisine, originated and perfected by black cooks in white kitchens, as well as in their own homes."

Food has always played a very important role in the social traditions of all southerners. Family gatherings, funerals, religious occasions, celebrations, and Sunday dinners are often accompanied by tables heavy-laden with a great variety of meats, seafood, vegetables, rice dishes, and desserts. Frequently, certain family members are given the honor of preparing specific dishes for such family meals and do so until they die or are no longer able to cook.

Food is also a key component of celebrations and festivals. Penn Center's Heritage Days, Sapelo Island's Cultural Day, St. Simon's Island's Georgia Sea Island Festival, the Beaufort Gullah Festival, and many other festivals large and small, are known for fine foods prepared in traditional ways by local residents. Gullah/Geechee cooking – southern cooking – is definitely in the mainstream and is no longer confined to Gullah/Geechee communities.

Somewhat less tangible than baskets, cast nets, quilts, and food is the growing success and popularity currently experienced by the growing number of performers of traditional Gullah/Geechee music. Many of these groups reach out to their audience and create an interactive performance that enables those in attendance to share in the singing, clapping, and rhythms of the music. Among the most notable of these are the McIntosh County Shouters, the Georgia Sea Island Singers; the Moving Star Hall Singers of John's Island, South Carolina; the Brotherhood Gospel Singers of Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina; the Plantation Singers of Charleston, South Carolina; and the Hallelujah Singers from Beaufort County, South Carolina. Appreciation of traditional Gullah/Geechee music has increased to the point that some groups who are not native Gullah/Geechee people are now performing the music.

Frankie Quimby of the Georgia Sea Island Singers puts it like this, "I'm a firm believer that you can't know where you're going until you realize where you've come from. We have dedicated our lives to trying to preserve that rich heritage and culture that our ancestors handed down to us" (Quimby, personal communication 2000).

Georgia Sea Island Singers perform at Charles Pinckney National Historic Site, Mt. Pleasant, SC

The McIntosh County Shouters of Bolden, Georgia, are among the last active practitioners of one of the most venerable of African-American song, rhythm, and movement traditions, the shout, also known as the ring shout. The tradition of the shout itself is actually in the fervor of the hand clapping and audible foot work, rather than in the song.

First described by outsiders in 1845, the stylistic antecedents of the ring shout are indisputably African in origin and proliferated in praise houses. Only members of the praise house could watch or participate in the shout. New members were frequently asked to lead the shout to demonstrate their skills (Simpson 1985). The shout grew in popularity in the study area when slave owners outlawed the use of drums for fear that slaves would use them to communicate between plantations.

The shout consists of call-and-response singing, dance movement in a counterclockwise circle which takes place as a shuffling movement wherein feet are never crossed and never leave the ground. There are interlocking, percussive body rhythms and a type of group devotion embedded in the shout that has made it a lifeline to the West African cultural legacy through times of slavery and into the 21st Century. Shouters of today move in a counter clockwise circle, pounding canes on the wooden floor or a sheet of plywood in a manner not unlike early foot drums. This rhythmic movement has been described as “playing the body parts with percussive strength” or “interpretation of the parts of the body as independent instruments of percussive force” (Thompson, 1981).

McIntosh County Shouters

Art Rosenbaum of the University of Georgia, who has been crucial in documenting the ring-shouting tradition, describes it as "an impressive fusion of call-and-response singing, polyrhythmic percussion and formalized, dance-like movements" [that has] "had a profound influence on African American music and religious practice." The shout tradition has been maintained, both by isolation and by "community cohesiveness and sufficient economic support for survival" (Rosenbaum 1998).

Elder Halim Gullahbemi
Penn Center Heritage Days

Today, all over the Low Country, Gullah/Geechee performers, artists, and community activists are telling their own stories. Almost every community has story tellers, crafts people, artists and/or performers who are keeping the story of the Gullah/Geechee people and their African connections. Some have written books and/or produced audio and video programs. Festivals are held up and down the coastline to celebrate Gullah/Geechee culture, traditions, and foods. While these festivals provide a day or two of entertainment and extraordinary foods, they also serve as an educational resource for those from within Gullah/Geechee communities as well as outsiders.

These performers and countless others have elevated Gullah/Geechee music to a level of worldwide recognition and appreciation. Gullah/Geechee musicians have performed nationally and internationally in such places as the White House, the Olympic Games, governors' mansions, Moja Arts Festival, Newport Festival, Piccolo Spoleto Festival, Carnegie Hall, on national television and in several PBS documentaries, including the recent *This Far by Faith: African American Spiritual Journey* (2003).

Musical traditions of the Gullah/Geechee people have also heavily influenced both the music of the Low Country and the music of the entire nation. According to Joyner (1999):

> … most white southerners grew up with the songs of back southerners falling upon their ears. … most southern whites understood that the songs of black southerners somehow captured the essence of the southern irony, of the southern tragedy, and of the southern hope. … they were profoundly influenced by the songs of their black neighbors.
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> … In the convergence of various African cultures and European cultures in the American South, white southerners had their old cultures Africanized by their black neighbors and black southerners had their old cultures Europeanized by their white neighbors.

Some of this musical syncretism, *i.e.*, the blending of elements of two or more cultures into a distinct new cultural form, is well-known today as jazz, blues, and gospel. Perhaps the latest incarnation of simple percussive rhythms is demonstrated in the recent Stomp phenomenon on Broadway and among African-American college students (Fine, 2003; Rath 2000).

The ethnological sleuthing of scholars such as Mary Twining and Dale Rosengarten has produced some very dramatic evidence for direct, specific African origins of Gullah quilting patterns, basketry, and music. The musical connection is well-illustrated by the poignant story portrayed in the documentary, *The Language You Cry In* (1998), and merits further discussion here.